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TEARS FOR TIMOR

HON. DON EDWARDS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, July 29, 1980

Mr. EDWARDS of California. Mr. Speaker, I would like to commend the following editorial on East Timor to my colleagues' attention.

The editorial, which recently appeared in the New York Times, describes the tragic conditions on the island and provides us with a brief history leading up to the present problems. It makes references to the deaths of as many as 200,000 people, one-third of the island's population; the embezzlement of U.S. aid shipments by Indonesian officials; and the continuation of the guerrilla war for self-determination conducted by the brave group of freedom fighters. Additional reports in today's New York Times describe the renewed vigor of the Fretilin armed struggle against the Indonesian army.

The editorial presents suggestions for positive steps toward a long-term solution of the problems in East Timor. It is suggested that the Portuguese may offer to resume their stewardship of East Timor if Indonesia can be persuaded to pull out of the island. The next step would involve Portuguese sovereignty over the island leading up to true self-determination by the East Timorese people. Although this scenario will not be easy to achieve, a quick analysis of the situation highlights its desirability as a road to the achievement of a permanent political solution to the crisis on the island.

The Indonesians invaded the island 5 years ago and remain there today in violation of international law. Despite official U.S. policy, the Timorese people refuse to acquiesce in the Indonesian annexation of the island. The resistance on the islands continues to this day.

Portugal remains recognized as the legal sovereign of the area by the United Nations. The Portuguese Government and people have shown their interest in the problems on the island and their interest in assuming their responsibilities there. It is time that we encourage the Portuguese to assert their resposibilities under international law. This would be a significant first step toward the attainment of self-determination on the island. Without such steps, it is apparent that the violence on the island will continue.

[From the New York Times, July 25, 1980]

TEARS FOR TIMOR

Five years ago, while most of the world wasn't looking, Indonesia invaded East Timor, a Portuguese colony in the South Pacific that had just become independent. A year later, it formally annexed East Timor and assured the world that this constituted "self-determination." The results have been so dreadful that Indonesia has made East Timor's long years under Portuguese rule seem like an idyll—and made even a return to Portuguese responsibility a desirable goal.

Perhaps a third of the 600,000 East Timorese have perished through war, military occupation and famine. The extent of the disaster can only be estimated because Indonesia will not permit relief agencies or the press to have unrestricted access to the area. What can be gleaned suggests that Jakarta has ample reason to keep the curtain closed. Reports from Timor tell of renewed guerrilla war, of large-scale diversion of relief supplies and of treacherous executions of insurgents.

Amnesty International has asked President Suharto of Indonesia to account for some 20 vanished Timorese political prisoners, most of them supporters of the leftist Fretilin Party. Refugee priests charge that much of the food intended for the starving—including nearly $13 million worth of American aid—has been embezzled by Indonesian officials. Despite claims that the territory has been "pacified," Fretilin leaders credibly assert that guerrillas have resumed their fight and have been able to strike at Dili, Timor's capital.

East Timor's travail began when it was precipitately given independence after four centuries as a colony by a Portugal that was itself undergoing revolution. East Timor was plunged into civil war, which became the pretext for Indonesia's invasion, only hours after President Nixon visited Jakarta. And ever since, the American position has been that it "understands" the takeover without formally approving it—an indulgence that has much to do with the strategic importance of Indonesia and its oil.

As refugees have trickled into Lisbon, the Portuguese have begun to debate their own complicity. There are reports that Portugal may offer to resume its stewardship of East Timor if Indonesia can be persuaded to pull back. Admittedly, this is a long shot course, but even Jakarta may now be willing to reckon the costs of a messy war with a stubborn people. If Portugal is indeed willing to try again and this time better prepare East Timor for independence, then a step backward could truly be a leap forward.